

Interview with German anti-fascist group TOP Berlin

Shift interview TOP Berlin about anti-fascism in Germany. Originally published in September 2009.

In the UK, we hear a lot about a strong autonomous Antifa movement in Germany. Could you give us a bit of an idea how this has come about?

The autonomous Antifa is part of the radical left movement which developed following 1968. After the protests of the early 1970s had faded, the radical left seemed to be in a dead-end. A large part of the left occupied itself with the debate over the armed struggle of the RAF and other armed groups, as well as with their conditions of imprisonment. Another part organized in orthodox communist splinter groups. Although strong in numbers, by the early 1980s both approaches had lost contact to societal discourse and struggles.

The autonomous movement reacted to that with a changed concept of politics. Change should be begun now, instead of waiting for a far-off revolution to take place. The more anarchist outlook of the 'autonome' led to a relocation of focus from class struggle to the sphere of reproduction. Therefore struggles for adequate housing, over local planning issues and against large projects like the construction of Frankfurt Airport and a large Mercedes testing-road in Northwest Germany became important. The struggle against organised Nazis had always played a role for the radical left. Since the foundation of the NPD in 1969 and its electoral success in the following years there had been protests against its conferences and other events. An autonomous antifascism could follow on this tradition.

Organised neo-Nazis were seen as posing a threat to the living conditions of those on the radical left, who felt that their occupied houses and autonomous youth centres were under threat. In addition, the struggle against the neo-Nazis was understood to be a revolutionary struggle as the Nazis were perceived as the storm-troopers of the pre-fascist Federal Republic. This system would make use of the Nazis to suppress social and radical left movements. In the 1980s it was possible to achieve wide mobilisation with this analysis. In the early 1990s, however, as a wave of pogrom-like riots and attacks on asylum seekers swept through the country, the radical left found that with this analysis it was not in a position to do anything against it. Racist and fascist ideas seemed to be held by a large part of the population.

Under the impression that the autonomous movement lacked the ability to intervene, many activists founded small autonomous Antifa groups. In order to combine their potentials and become capable of action of a national level, in 1992 they founded the 'Antifaschistische Aktion-Bundesweite Organisation' (AABO) and a little later the 'Bundesweites Antifatreffen' (BAT). The AABO attempted to establish a stable organisation while the BAT aimed purely at creating a network of autonomous groups. Both attempts proved successful in mobilising large numbers of people against the few Nazi marches which took place in the 1990s. Their meaning decreased significantly, however, as nationwide mobilisation against Nazi marches became problematic, due to the sheer number of marches taking place. In addition, analysis hadn't advanced much further from the 1980s. Antifa was understood as 'der Kampf ums Ganze' ('the struggle against the system as a whole'); by attacking the most reactionary parts of society a blow would be struck against the whole system. This lacking analysis was proved dramatically wrong during the time of the Red-Green coalition.

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'der Kampf ums Ganze' ('the struggle against the system as a whole'): by attacking the most reactionary parts of society a blow would be struck against the whole system. This lacking analysis was proved dramatically wrong during the time of the Red-Green coalition.

When racist attacks in Germany peaked in the 1990s the state and police became increasingly active against neo-Nazi groups. In 2000, you had the 'Antifa-Summer'.

What was that?

In 1998 the conservative government fell and was replaced by a coalition of the Social Democrats and the Green Party. This government, unlike the previous government, made the problem of neo-fascist organisation into a political issue, as well as racist and anti-Semitic attitudes in society. Following a failed bombing on a Dusseldorf Synagogue in 2000 came a wave of repression against the organised right. The most important action against the neo-Nazis was the

government-initiated attempt to ban the NPD. Although this failed in the end, because too many leading NPD members turned out to be employed by the secret service, the trial led to a series of investigations, confiscations and a large sense of insecurity in the neo-fascist scene. In addition to this, the government pushed through a row of legal changes, which limited the right to demonstrate, banned certain fascist symbols and made it easier for the government to ban organisations which were opposed to the constitution. In the end the government made millions of Euros available for education against racism and anti-Semitism.

On a governmental level, the democratic parties in many parts of Germany agreed not to work with representatives of the extreme right-wing parties. The conservative party also often took part in this agreement.

How was the state's anti-fascism different from that of the Antifa movement? Why was the state suddenly interested in tackling the neo-Nazi problem?

The reasons why the state moved against fascist structures are complex. A major reason is that the government had recognised that it was damaging to the investment climate to have gangs of armed Nazis wandering the streets, or to have fairly openly national socialist parties sitting in the local government. This was especially the case as just at this time foreign investment was urgently needed in East Germany, in order to halt the total decay of the region's economy.

But also important was that in the time of the Red-Green coalition the German self-identity had changed. While the years after the war were still marked by a denial of guilt, from the 1990s on Auschwitz and National Socialism became an integral component part of the German identity. The responsibility for National Socialism and the Shoah was not only acknowledged but also turned into something which could be utilised for the German identity. The reunited Germany, redeemed from its past misdeeds, and with 'the experience of two dictatorships' behind it, could enter the world as a democratic state. In this way the German attack on Yugoslavia during its civil war was justified, as the Serbians were supposedly planning a second Auschwitz for the Kosovans. On the other hand the new German democracy refers to the Eastern Bloc, the 'second German dictatorship', to stress the lack of alternatives to the bourgeois capitalist system. In this tense relationship between a newly formed totalitarianism theory and the striving for a good position on the world market

stands the new German political outlook. To this also belongs the public memorials to the victims of National Socialism, as well as the German victims of air raids and expulsions in a

‘European history of suffering’. Also belonging to this are the interventions in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, as likewise the German push for the strengthening of the European border regime. And, finally, also belonging to this are the decided measures against neo-Nazis, who threaten the new German self-confidence and the state’s monopoly of violence.

How did radical anti-fascists react to this? Did it strengthen or weaken the movement?

The state’s action against neo-Nazis led the antifascist movement to an identity crisis. If fascist and neo-Nazi groups had up till then been seen as the storm-troopers of the system,

who were supposed to suppress social movements on the government’s behalf, now, at the latest, the radical left had to confront the fact that Antifa was not ‘der Kampf ums Ganze’. A part of the radical left denounced the state’s action as hypocritical. It was pointed out that despite the state’s measures against neo-Nazis there remained in society a right-wing consensus. This consensus was supposedly based on a continuity of the concepts of national socialism, which were still virulent in society. This would express itself in the ‘volkisch’

(blood based nationalism) German foreign policy, for example the early recognition of Croatia and the support for the Palestinian cause, as well as in a tendency to historical revisionism. The state’s actions against Nazis were seen as hypocritical as the social structures on which both the German national project and the Nazis were based, were left untouched.

Another part of the antifascist movement accepted that the struggle against fascists offered no revolutionary perspectives and attempted to sharpen their opposition to the system in other ways. In particular the criticism of capitalism came into the foreground. Capitalism was now analysed as a complex network of social relationships, which are structurally prone to crisis.

Neo-Nazis provided a negative solution to this inherent tendency of capitalism towards crisis.

This solution, however, was based on a mistaken and structurally anti-Semitic analysis of the way capitalism integrates individuals into society and therefore not only had no emancipatory potential but had the potential to create something far worse than bourgeois capitalist society.

For this reason neo-Nazis had to be fought, even though this fight had no revolutionary perspectives. These should instead be sought in a confrontation with bourgeois-democratic society.

While the following heavy debates seriously reduced the ability of the radical left to mobilise for years to come, and the resultant insecurity mobbed many antifascists to retire from politics, these tremors opened up the critical examination of the left's own positions and in the end led to a strengthened theoretical confrontation with the basics of radical left politics.

How, in your group, do you think of anti-fascism now? Did you reconceptualise it to distinguish yourselves from liberal, bourgeois anti-fascism?

TOP Berlin comes out of the tradition of autonomous Antifa groups and still has in this field its greatest potential to mobilise. Accordingly we have intervened in the antifascist movement and taken part in antifascist protests. In the process we have always tried to insist on our own critique of mainstream society. Two examples of this: On 1 May 2008 Nazis demonstrated in Hamburg for 'Volksgemeinschaft' (blood based national community') and against capitalist globalisation. In meetings and texts before the protest, we tried to work out a critique of the volkisch and anti-Semitic positions of the Nazis. In addition, we took part in the direct action against the march in Hamburg. Another mobilisation was against the 'Anti-Islamisation Congress' organised by an extreme right-wing party in Cologne, in collaboration with other European extreme right-wing parties. We undertook a nationwide mobilisation with the nationwide communist 'ums Ganze' federation, in which TOP Berlin is organised. In articles and in our own congress we tried to work out what role a culturalist understanding of society plays for the German national narrative. With this we wanted to fight not only the thinly masked racism of the extreme right, but also the everyday nationalism of mainstream German society. As well, we presented a criticism of Islamism as a reactionary crisis solution. The

'ums Ganze' federation took part in the protests by organising a large

demonstration on the eve of the congress.

These two mobilizations display well our approach. We take part in antifascist protests, but try with theoretical content to lay a basic critique and bring this into the movement.

What has that meant practically? Has the focus of your activities changed?

TOP Berlin was only formed in 2007 before the G8 summit in Heiligendamm. Therefore our group positions haven't been affected by the Antifa Summer. But in contrast to its predecessor groups, Kritik und Praxis and Antifaschistische Aktion Berlin, we try to initiate more of our own campaigns, instead of following the fascists' movements. In 2009 with ums Ganze we have initiated an anti-national campaign with the motto 'Staat. Nation. Kapital Scheisse. Gegen die Herrschaft der falschen Freiheit' ('State. Nation. Capital. Shit. Against the dominance of the false freedom'). As part of this campaign we have published a book on the criticism of the state, organised a series of events on the critique of the nation and called for a nationwide demonstration against the celebrations of the 60th birthday of the foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the second half of the year ums Ganze and TOP

Berlin will mainly work on the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall and broaden our criticism of the nation to a criticism of real existing socialism. Besides this we will hold our second Marx Autumn School and devote ourselves to the second volume of Capital.

TOP (Theory. Organisation. Praxis) is a Berlin-based antifascist, anti-capitalist group. They are part of the "...ums Ganze!" alliance (<http://umsganze.blogspot.de>) which consists of more than ten groups from all over Germany. Parts of this text are based on a paper written prior to the G8 summit which can be found in English at www.top-berlin.net. To get in touch with them write to mail (at) top-berlin.net.